

Women in the American Economy. a Documentary History, 1967 to 1929

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Book Reviews

Women in the American Economy. A Documentary History, 1676 to 1929, edited by W. Elliot Brownlee and Mary M. Brownlee. A Yale Paperbound. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976. \$4.95.

W. Eliot and Mary M. Brownlee in their introduction to *Women In The American Economy* suggest that recent interest in women's work in the U.S. has been focused on the years following World War II, explaining that during the decade including the second World War "both the character of women's work and the rate at which women participated in the labor force underwent exceptionally marked changes." The Brownlees insist, however, that no explanation of why significant changes occurred at that specific time can suffice if it lacks a "grasp of the historical background of those changes." In light of the recent emphasis on "contemporary" issues and the lack of sustained analysis of women's work, the Brownlees call upon the students of women's history to familiarize themselves with source material that can "stimulate understanding of the economic life of American women before 1929." The Brownlees obviously hope that their documentary history will fill this significant gap in the history of women's work and explain that the documents selected for the volume both convey the eminent variety of women's attitudes toward work as well as the complexity of their participation in the marketplace "particularly the ingenuity, flexibility, shrewd adaptation, aggressiveness, and persistent search for a 'sense of self' that have characterized the contribution of women to the nation's economic life."

The Brownlees' task seems both straightforward and deceptively simple: to prepare a volume of documents that will illustrate the role of women in the nation's economy, and to analyze their attitudes toward work for a period of 254 years. (Why the year 1675 is established as the starting point for the history is never adequately explained). But the Brownlees were faced with two thorny problems in preparing and organizing their volume. First, they had to determine what types of documentary material should be included in such a history and they also had to decide how to best organize the documents they selected into a cohesive and sensible framework.

The Brownlees include documents that reflect the working experiences of women who clearly did not represent the work and life styles of most women living in nineteenth century rural society. In their section "Women on Farms" the Brownlees present, for example, excerpts from the diary of Elizabeth Allston Pringle (1845-1921), a woman who owned and managed a post Civil-War plantation. Although the editors suggest her position as plantation manager was not unique, as many Southern white women found themselves

in similar situations following the death of their husbands, Pringle was unusually successful in her role as manager-owner. The Brownlees also placed in this chapter selections from the reminiscences of Bethinia Angelina Owens-Adair (1840-1926) an Oregon farm wife who eventually gained status and recognition as a successful medical practitioner. The Brownlees themselves admit that Owens-Adair had a most exceptional career; obviously quite unlike that of a typical pioneer farm wife.

In their chapter on "Women in Factories, 1820-70" the editors include a selection that describes the working experiences and life style of a young mill girl in Lowell, Massachusetts. The excerpt comes from *A New England Girlhood* written by Lucy Larcom (1824-93) who, as the Brownlees are forced to admit, had greater "sensitivities" and a more "substantial" education than did other New England mill girls. Larcom, for example, was active in the factory's Improvement Society and worked on a magazine, the *Lowell Offering*. She later left Massachusetts, acquired a college education, and taught English literature. The editors do insist, however, that Larcom's mill experience was not significantly different from that of her peers.

But to the Brownlees' credit it must be mentioned that the editors do include selections that reflect the experiences and attitudes of the millions of women who may not have had the opportunities to pursue a higher education or to acquire specialized skills, but who, nevertheless, played an important role in the nation's economy. For example, included in the chapter "Women on Farms" is a marvelous selection from the diary of a Wisconsin farm girl. These simple diary excerpts reveal a great deal about the daily life of a nineteen-year-old girl writing during the bitter Wisconsin winter of 1865.

In addition to erratic selections there are organizational problems in this volume. For example, the chronological periods represented by the selections in the first two chapters are rather vague, while the third and fourth sections on "Women in Factories" deal with well defined chronological eras: the periods from 1820-1870, and from 1870-1929. The concluding chapters discuss women in the services, the professions, and as consumers, and once again the Brownlees are not very specific about the time framework they utilize. One also questions the internal ordering of the chapters and the reasons for the inclusion of specific documents.

But while there are some definite flaws in the organization of this volume, the readings themselves are fascinating. Each selection is carefully introduced and the introductory material clearly places in historical context the document the reader is about to study. Despite the obstacles they face, the Brownlees have prepared a volume of readings that do display the diversity and complexity of women's attitudes toward work and their participation in the economy during the neglected period prior to World War II.

—Judith G. Cetina

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